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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000591

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TAGS: PGOV OIIP KPRV ECON SCUL IZ

SUBJECT: PRT TIKRIT: SALAH AD DIN TV'S STAR IS RISING, BID FOR PRIVATIZATION

REF: 06 BAGHDAD 4231

Classified By: Team Leader Stephanie Miley for reasons 1.5 (b/d).

**¶1.** (U) This is a PRT Tikrit, Salah ad Din cable. This cable has been cleared by the 3rd Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division (3/82 BCT) and the Tactical PSYOP Detachment 1630, who have Salah ad Din in their area of operation.

**¶2.** (C) SUMMARY. With its exclusive coverage of Saddam's burial and the aftermath in his home province of Salah ad Din (SaD), SaD satellite television station's (SaDTV) star has been in rising in the pan Sunni Arab world. SaDTV broadcasts through NileSat and reaches the greater Middle East. Since the station's establishment in 2005 with Coalition Forces' (CF) IIG money, it has had complete editorial control of its programming (reftel). Recent improvements to SaDTV's program quality have made it on par with similar stations in the region. Recently, a representative of al Thuraya Group of Dubai contacted the station's manager Dawlat Dahash to announce the group's desire to invest between USD 10 - 40 million in the station via the Ashur Bank for International Investment. The Al Thuraya Group's interest in investing in the station, however, brings to light many legal ambiguities with regard to the station's equipment and ownership. SaDTV has become a major source of information and pride among the people of Salah ad Din, achieving its intended purpose of providing accurate and timely information to the province's citizens to combat AIF misinformation and propaganda. The PRT, 3/82 Brigade Combat Team, and the Tactical PSYOP Detachment 1630 see privatization as the best hope for SaDTV's future and are currently seeking a legal decision from Multinational Corps Iraq (MNC-I) to determine how best to proceed with the station's privatization. END SUMMARY.

**¶3.** (C) With Salah ad Din Television's (SaDTV) exclusive coverage of Saddam's burial and the aftermath in his home province of SaD, SaDTV, the province's local satellite television station, has grown in popularity in the pan Sunni Arab world. During the weeks after Saddam's interment, the station received hundreds of text messages from across the Middle East. It is clear through our interactions with many of the province's residents that the station is enormously popular.

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The Station's Creation  
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**¶4.** (C) SaDTV was created in 2005 using Coalition Forces' IIG funds as part of the "Tikrit Media Center," and the station first began airing programming in September 2005. In the beginning, the station's programming included only a few locally developed programs, with a bulk of the shows broadcasted from an archive the station purchased. The station is broadcasted on NileSat satellite network, and its coverage reaches viewers throughout the Middle East. The station has always had complete editorial control of its

programming.

¶ 15. (C) Shortly after the station became operational, there was a change in management, and an influential tribal sheikh took control. In 2006, the station received additional IIG funds to enhance its equipment to expand news coverage. Until a fair contract re-bid in mid-2006, the station floundered under the tribal sheikh's poor management and dictatorial style.

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A Positive Change in Management  
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¶ 16. (C) In October 2006, the contract was awarded to Dawlat Dahash of Beirut Company, and the management changeover process was managed by the provincial government. One of the contract provisions indicated that SaDTV would only receive CF funding for one additional year (through October 2007), after which it would have to find additional sources.

¶ 17. (C) As the new manager Dahash has made significant strides in improving the quality of the station's programming, including production of local news and entertainment shows and acquisition of additional stock programming archives. The programming, especially the news, has become a much more professional production. Purchase, for example, of a teleprompter allows the newscaster to engage the audience more fully by not having to read off printed scripts, and use of the satellite news gathering van has increased the station's area of news coverage.

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SaDTV's Star on the Rise  
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¶ 18. (C) In the wake of the announcement of the Saddam verdict, the central government ordered the closure of the station for reportedly "airing programming that incited violence" (reftel). To prevent a similar problem during Saddam's execution, Dawlat sought guidance for the station's programming, and many provincial leaders commented on how professionally the station covered the execution's aftermath.

¶ 19. (C) Through the station's exclusive footage of Saddam's burial and the aftermath, it gained a greater following in the pan Sunni Arab world. In the days following the execution, the station received hundreds of text messages from throughout the region.

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A Move for Privatization  
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¶ 10. (C) Cognizant of the fact that CF funding would be ending in 2007, Dawlat began pursuing other funding options. First, he approached the Salah ad Din Provincial Council and presented a budget for further improvement and expansion of the station. The PC's leadership reportedly responded by saying that if the PC funds the station, it "controls the station and its message." Dawlat presented a similar plan to the Governor and Deputy Governor, and they reportedly had a similar response.

¶ 11. (C) Seeking editorial independence, Dawlat decided to pursue private sector funding, first through advertising and second through business partnerships. Recently, a representative of al Thuraya Group contacted Dawlat and requested he travel to Dubai to discuss the station's future. At the meeting, Dawlat learned the Iraqi expatriates in the business group were seeking to invest in the station as a means to further their interest in the reconstruction and rebuilding of Iraq, particularly in Salah Ad Din. According to Dawlat, the group stated they will invest between USD 10 -

40 million in the station via the Ashur Bank for International Investment. The group said it would only seek investment in the station if Dawlat is the manager with a controlling interest in ownership. (NOTE: Al Thuraya Group is the holding company for "Today Broadcasting Center" in Baghdad and owns several other Iraq-based businesses. END NOTE.)

¶12. (C) The Al Thuraya Group's interest in investing in the station brings to light many legal ambiguities with regard to the station's equipment and ownership. At present, the station is not listed as an Iraqi business entity, and it is unclear who actually owns the station's equipment. The station has a board of directors appointed by the provincial government, but they have not been engaged in oversight or operations.

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Comment  
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¶13. (C) SaDTV has become a major source of information and pride among the people of Salah ad Din, achieving its intended purpose of providing accurate and timely information to the province's citizens to combat AIF misinformation and propaganda. Under Dawlat's leadership, we are confident that in the long-term SaDTV will develop into a neutral, pan Arab television station with great potential for disseminating information and promoting education in Iraq's Sunni heartland. The PRT, 3/82 Brigade Combat Team, and the Tactical PSYOP Detachment 1630 see privatization as the best hope for SaDTV's future and are currently seeking a legal decision from MNC-I to determine how best to proceed with the station's privatization. END COMMENT.

¶14. (U) For additional reporting from PRT Tikrit, Salah ad Din, please see our SIPRNET Reporting Blog:  
<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Tikrit>.

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